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SUBJECT: BURMESE EXILE COMMUNITY AGREES ON UNITY IN GOVERNANCE NOT/NOT A UNITY GOVERNMENT

Classified By: Political Officer J.R. Littlejohn, reasons 1(b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) A group of 60 Burmese exile community leaders recently attended a Strategy Coordinating Committee (SCC) meeting in the border area to hash out a consolidated approach toward supporting the pro-democracy movement in Burma. Informally shooting down an idea to form a unity government, some members have turned their attention to retrofitting the various constitutions drafted by the ethnic groups into a federal constitution. The hope is that this document will eventually counter the Constitution prepared by the government of Burma.

OVERVIEW OF THE STRATEGY COORDINATING COMMITTEE MEETING

¶2. (C) In the latter part of February, 60 representatives from various exile organizations huddled together in a safe house teetering on the border between Thailand and Burma. The attendees represented a hodgepodge of exile groups such as the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC), the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), the Women's League of Burma and various youth groups. Those in attendance were divided into working groups, each handling one of four issues: the Common Roadmap, mass mobilization, international affairs, and arms struggle.

¶3. (C) We were told by a member of the NCGUB that this was the sixth such gathering, but that the meetings were put on indefinite hold in 2003 because of rifts with the ENC. Our source suggested that in early 2003 the ENC members were considered rising stars in exile politics and were propagating their own plans, such as forming a Roadmap without consulting the NCGUB. He said they were also reluctant to participate because of fear the meetings would lead to consolidation of exile groups into one unified organization and loss of control of funding and programming as a consequence of such unity. For this reason, this latest meeting is considered a breakthrough in exile relations after three years of silence.

DECLARING A GOVERNMENT IN EXILE(AGAIN?)

¶4. (C) In the lead up to the February SCC meeting, our contacts billed the event as the occasion out of which a coordinated strategy would emerge. Our contacts predicted, however, that an idea to form a unity government comprised of new leadership (that would extend to woman and ethnic groups) threatened to divide the fledgling unity that existed under the current composition.

¶ 15. (C) The earliest opponents of this idea were Naing Aung of NCUB and Forum for Democracy Burma (FDB), and Zaw Zaw Htun of NCUB and FDB. In January and early February, both men shared with us their concerns about a group of NCUB members led by Maung Maung (NCUB/FTUB), which was floating a proposal to undermine the Burmese government's National Convention process by forming an exile government. Our contacts feared Maung Maung's plan could diminish the legitimacy of the NLD and 88 Generation Student (GS) groups. Both men stated that the NLD and 88GS had not been consulted about this idea to essentially merge the NCGUB with the NCUB. Others contacted us to express anxiety, and added that they did not believe their Thai hosts would support a new government in exile based in Thailand, for fear of inviting political pressure from the Burmese regime.

¶ 16. (C) On March 12, David Taw, a member of the leadership in the ENC and NCUB said that the ENC did not intend to be a party to a new government in exile. He said that he was against such an idea since the exile community already has the NCGUB. He also noted that this issue never made it to the floor of the SCC meeting because of its growing unpopularity. He said the chief complaint was based on the lack of legitimacy of any new governing body. Since the former government was elected, people would wonder from whence the new government derives its mandate.

¶ 17. (C) We met on March 13 with Maung Maung (NCUB-FTUB) to hear his view on the idea of a coalition government in exile. He suggested this proposal had been blown out of proportion by others in the exile community. He said the most important outcome from the SCC meeting was agreement for NCUB, NCGUB and ENC to coordinate more closely. In fact, he was much more interested in discussing the Common Roadmap being

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drafted by the exile community, and a new Federal Constitution which would essentially link individual ethnic states' constitutions together with a new centralized federal structure.

¶ 18. (C) On March 29, Debbie Stothard -- a well-connected non-Burmese expatriate activist -- told us that the coalition or unity government idea was not going to be adopted, and certain members of the NCGUB and NCUB floating it would get into a lot of trouble if more people heard about it. She echoed concerns expressed to her about legitimacy of such a newly formed government. On the latest flurry of rhetoric about a new constitution drafting process, she noted that it was a good exercise for all groups to understand the drafting process, but she predicted it would remain just an exercise not an actionable item.

¶ 19. (C) Comment: This much-hyped SCC meeting may have established a basis for exile groups to engage in dialogue more uniformly. But no concrete conclusions were reached, and judging from conversations with other participants and Burma-watchers, the Constitution and Roadmaps are likely to get lost in the shuffle as exiles seek out the next idea that could garner international support (read: funding).
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